

**CALLED TO LEAD:  
WOMEN AS SPIRITUAL LEADERS IN MESSIANIC JUDAISM<sup>1</sup>**

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The question of women serving in spiritual leadership is still quite controversial. To further complicate matters, often the debate depends on the particular role(s) under discussion. Obviously, a woman serving in children's education is far less controversial than a woman serving as an elder or ordained clergy. Furthermore, all sides argue their respective position is the most biblical, authoritative, or most historically continuous.

The reality is that gender norms have continuously evolved and regressed throughout history, and much of our modern discussion was shaped not during the biblical eras, but during the Middle Ages and early modern periods, when many of the most famous theologians and biblical commentators lived, and when the roles of women were much more restricted and less nuanced than at other times throughout history. There are those who might argue, for example, that the discussion of women in spiritual leadership is a result of the "women's liberation" movement, or the product of more recent social agendas. However, this discussion is neither a new phenomenon nor a unique product of the modern world, as many ancient sources also wrestle with similar questions concerning the roles of women.

This paper will explore the question of women in spiritual leadership, particularly as rabbis, from a biblical and socio-historical perspective, and demonstrate that women have served in all positions of spiritual leadership – in biblical and subsequent history – as deacons, elders, evangelists, congregational leaders, apostles, and ordained clergy. Women were leaders in

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this paper are based on a paper originally presented at the Young Messianic Jewish Scholars Conference, June 2007, Beverly Hills, CA.

ancient Israel. Yeshua had female disciples. And Paul ordained and supported women in all levels of spiritual leadership. The biblical text is much more nuanced on this subject than often argued or assumed. Therefore, after a careful and critical review of biblical and historical examples, this paper will argue for the full support of greater participation for women within a variety of leadership roles, and for the ordination of women as rabbinic and spiritual authorities.

### **Women and Biblical Scholarship**

One of the most exciting developments within modern biblical scholarship is in the study of women in the ancient societies in which the biblical texts were produced, and how the depictions and narratives of women have been interpreted and understood over time.<sup>2</sup> This has resulted in a rather pertinent observation, as explained by Carol Meyers:

Until relatively recently, virtually all the interpreters of scripture were men. Over the long centuries of Jewish and Christian biblical study, perspectives on female figures have been provided by male theologians, sages, artists, writers, clergy, and scientists. Directly or indirectly, this male-dominated interpretive tradition has affected the way all of us, female and male, read the Bible. My experience in teaching and writing about biblical and Israelite women has made me realize that when it comes to passages dealing with women, the traditional interpretive materials are often biased. They sometimes ignore women; they sometimes misrepresent them. Although I remain neutral on the question of whether or not such male-dominated scholarship intentionally distorts or ignores many of the female figures of the Jewish and Christian canons, I am passionately about the need for more balanced scholarship on gender-related matters.<sup>3</sup>

This is an important observation regardless of one's conclusions. To have fruitful dialogue, we need to recognize that we all approach scripture with various preconceptions and interpretive frameworks, which include assumptions about women and their proper roles.

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<sup>2</sup> Carol Meyers, "Discovering Women in Scripture," *Bible Review*, Aug. 2000, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Meyers, "Discovering Women in Scripture," 5.

## WOMEN IN THE TANAKH

There are many examples of women serving in a variety of leadership roles, or even as central figures, within the Hebrew Bible. These women include (but are not limited to) Eve, the primordial mother of all; Miriam the prophet; Deborah the prophet, judge, and military leader; Huldah the Prophet, whose counsel was sought following the re-discovery of the Torah under the reign of Josiah; Ruth the Moabite (the great-grandmother of King David); and the famous Jewish queen of Persia, Esther.

### Creation and Garden Narratives

The book of Genesis opens with an account of creation and describes our first two primeval ancestors. According to chapter two, God decided that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so it was decided that a partner should be found for him. However, *“For Adam, a suitable helper could not be found - לא מצא עזר כנגדו (2:20b).”* The term, עזר כנגדו (*ezer k’negdo*), denotes one who is literally a helper of equal status.<sup>4</sup> According to Katherine Smith, the Hebrew does not infer a lower status, as the term “helpmate” might in English.<sup>5</sup> Rather, the Hebrew implies “correspondence and similarity.” The woman was created from man, creating the same species.<sup>6</sup> That is also the reason why the woman was created from Adam’s rib and not from the ground. This is also why she is called Eve: *And the man called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living (3:20, JPS)*. According to Rabbi Samson R. Hirsch, the father of Modern Orthodoxy, the woman’s body was built from one side of the man’s, and not from the

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<sup>4</sup> “Equal and adequate to himself.” WTM Morphology and Abridged BDB entry, *Bible Works* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> Kay Silberling, “Position Paper Regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women.” Presented to the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, October 15, 1993, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Silberling, “Position Paper Regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women,” 1.

ground, so that the single human being became two, thereby demonstrating the equal value of men and women.<sup>7</sup>

What immediately follows in Genesis is a description of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. Interpretation of this passage often negatively focuses only on Eve, without addressing Adam's role in their sin. According to Nahum Sarna:

The woman is not a temptress. She does not say a word but simply hands her husband the fruit, which he accepts and eats. The absence of any hint of resistance or even hesitation on his part is strange. It should be noted, however, that in speaking to the woman, the serpent consistently used the plural form. This suggests that the man was all the time within ear's reach of the conversation and was equally seduced by its persuasiveness. In fact, the Hebrew text here literally means, "She also gave to her husband with her (*'immah*)," suggesting that he was a full participant in the sin, thereby refuting in advance his later excuse.<sup>8</sup>

Since this passage is regularly referenced within discussions against women exercising spiritual authority, it is important to highlight its proper context, and how it has been used to exclude women from spiritual leadership.

### **Miriam the Prophet**

Miriam was more than simply the sister of Moses, she is described as a leader among the people, guiding and making decisions alongside Moses and Aaron. She is further described as a prophet, often summoned along with Moses and Aaron before the Tent of Meeting (Num. 12:4-5), a leader of worship (Exodus 15:20-21), and the prophet Micah readily identifies Miriam as a leader of Israel: "*Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt and ransomed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam* (Micah 6:4, NASB 1995)."

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<sup>7</sup> *Artscroll Chumash* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 2000), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary, Breishit*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 25.

### **Deborah the Judge and Prophet**

Deborah served as a שׁוֹפֵטָה (*shoftah*), a “judge,” “prophet,” and military leader in Israel’s early history (Judges 4:4-5; 1 Chr. 17:6, 10; *et al*). Other than Samuel, Deborah is the only other leader during the period of the confederacy to be described as both a judge and a prophet. Furthermore, the concept of a biblical “judge” is more in line with the anthropological concept of a “big man,” or warlord, rather than the modern perception of a judicial official. Therefore, since she holds both of these positions she is both the military and spiritual authority.

The period of the judges (c.1250-1025 BCE) was a tumultuous and chaotic epoch in Israel’s history, with warrior-judges and a loose confederation of tribes that often battled against each other. Throughout the Book of Judges we are told, *“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes (17:6; 12:25; etc.).”*

Therefore, Deborah was a battle-hardened and brilliant spiritual and military figure. This is why her general, Barak, pleads with her to go into battle with them (4:8), because he knows that with her leading them, they will defeat their enemies. Which she does, and the entire next chapter is an entire song dedicated to her victory and exploits.

It would be wrong, however, to argue that Deborah was only significant because there were no capable men in Israel. Rather, we actually find the opposite to be true. Barak himself was a significant general and could not have mustered thousands of soldiers to his call if he were not capable himself. Additionally, the leaders of Israel’s enemies were also notable military leaders, which further emphasizes Deborah’s exceptionalism.

### **Huldah the Prophet**

The prophet Huldah was a relative of the prophet Jeremiah, and her counsel was sought by the High Priest Hilkiah and an entourage of significant officials following the

presentation/discovery of the Torah<sup>9</sup> under the reign of Josiah (2 Kings 22:14-21 and 2 Chron. 34:20-28). She was considered such a great prophet that when the Second Temple was built, gates in the southern wall were named after her (Huldah Gates).

The Babylonian Talmud records the following discussion about Huldah:

Huldah was a prophetess, as it is written: “*So Hilkiah the priest and Ahikam and Achbor and Shaphan and Asaiah went to Huldah the prophetess*” (II Kings 22:14) as emissaries of King Josiah. The Gemara asks: But if Jeremiah was found there, how could she prophesy? Out of respect for Jeremiah, who was her superior, it would have been fitting that she not prophesy in his presence. The Sages of the school of Rav say in the name of Rav: Huldah was a close relative of Jeremiah, and he did not object to her prophesying in his presence (b. Megillah 14b).<sup>10</sup>

Even though Jeremiah was also functioning in Jerusalem at the time, when the Torah was rediscovered, Hilkiah and those with him sought out Huldah (not Jeremiah!). Which is why the Talmud raises the question of her prophesying on the matter instead of Jeremiah.

As we consider the roles of women in the Tanakh, it might be helpful to quickly note two Judean queens who reigned as sovereign monarchs, Athaliah,<sup>11</sup> of the house of Omri, who reigned in Judah during the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE,<sup>12</sup> and Salome Alexandra, who reigned for nearly a decade during the late Hasmonean period. Another matter worth mentioning is that although it is true women did not serve as priests, clergy today are not priests in the biblical/Levitical sense, and therefore do not have the same expectations and requirements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> There is debate among scholars as to whether the account describes a rediscovery of the Torah or rather the introduction of the book of Deuteronomy.

<sup>10</sup> b. Megillah 14b, accessed via Sefaria.org.

<sup>11</sup> Athaliah is not necessarily a positive example, but she was a sovereign leader of the Jewish people.

<sup>12</sup> There is some dispute over the dates of her reign, for example, Albright proposed 842-837 BCE, whereas Thiele proposed 842/841-836/835.

<sup>13</sup> I am not denying elements of overlap, only that rabbis and other clergy today are not considered the same thing for a variety of reasons. For more on ways the positions do overlap, see Stuart Dauermann, *The Rabbi as a Surrogate Priest* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

Within the canon of the Hebrew Bible there are examples of women who served as leaders or appear as central figures. And some these women served in prominent roles – as prophets, warlords, monarchs, and spiritual heroes.

### **WOMEN IN THE APOCRYPHA**

Second Temple Jewish sources also demonstrate women leaders within Jewish tradition. Along with the apocryphal accounts of Esther, both Susanna and Judith also play central roles within apocryphal books. Judith, as described in the book named after her, is another sort of Jewish heroine. She is a beautiful widow who is praised for her devotion to God, Jewish piety, and self-denial. In a heroic act, she risked her life to slay the enemy and save the Jewish people and Jerusalem from annihilation. Her commitment to the commandments of Judaism is repeatedly highlighted throughout the text, emphasizing the importance of kosher dietary laws, circumcision, and the abhorrence of intermarriage.

Susanna, which was originally an apocryphal addition to the canonical book of Daniel, contains the story of another central female figure.<sup>14</sup> As a good Jewish heroine, she is described as one who feared the Lord, and as “a woman of great refinement and beautiful in appearance” (Susanna, v. 31). Overcoming the lure of an attempted seduction, she is credited with being faithful to not only her husband, but to God.

The apocryphal accounts of Susanna and Judith, as well as the martyred woman with seven sons in the books of Maccabees, all serve as heroes and examples of Jewish piety.<sup>15</sup> The compilers and readers who accepted these books as holy writ apparently had no problem with the central figures of these books being women. Furthermore, we do not have any evidence to argue

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<sup>14</sup> See introduction to Susanna, *The New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 179.

<sup>15</sup> Meyers, *op.cit.*

that these narratives were rejected, questioned, or devalued simply because the central figures were women.

## WOMEN IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Women play a central role within the New Testament, and we have examples of women serving in all levels of spiritual leadership - as disciples, congregational leaders, elders, teachers, prophets, and even apostles.<sup>16</sup> This is true both within the standard canonical scriptures as well as extra-biblical writings.

### Yeshua and Women

According to the Gospels, women were part of the wider circles of disciples who traveled around with Yeshua and the Twelve, assisting in Yeshua's work and ministry. Also included within these disciples are influential women who supported Yeshua's work financially:

*With him were the Twelve, and a number of women who had been healed from evil spirits and illnesses – Miriam (called Magdalit), from whom seven demons had gone out; Yohanah the wife of Herod's finance minister Kuza, Susanna; and many other women who drew on their own wealth to help him (Luke 8:1-3, CJB).*

The Gospel of Mark also refers to these influential women in his description of the crucifixion:

*There were women looking on from a distance ... these women had followed him and helped him when he was in Galilee. And many other women were there who had come up with him to Jerusalem (Mark 15:40-41, CJB).*

In the account of Yeshua teaching in the home of Mary and Martha, Mary is described as sitting at Yeshua's feet (Luke 10:39), which Toby Janicki correctly notes is an idiom for discipleship.<sup>17</sup> Although no women are included among the primary Twelve, women are still described as being part of Yeshua's wider circle of disciples. Furthermore, women also play

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<sup>16</sup> Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," 78.

<sup>17</sup> Toby Janicki, *The Way of Life (Didache: A New Translation and Messianic Jewish Commentary)* (Marshfield, MO: Vine of David, 2017), 21.



central roles within the narratives of the Gospels themselves.<sup>18</sup> For example, all four Gospels record that it was to women whom Yeshua first revealed himself after his resurrection.<sup>19</sup>

## Paul and Women

Paul the Apostle is best known for his work in bringing the salvific message of Yeshua to a non-Jewish audience. He is also attributed with writing a large portion of the books in the New Testament. And although Paul is often cited in opposition to women in spiritual leadership, the reality is that Paul ordained and supported women in all areas of spiritual leadership.<sup>20</sup> Within the Pauline epistles we encounter quite a number of women serving in significant capacities, including Lydia of Thyatira who led a small congregation in Philippi,<sup>21</sup> Tabitha, the only woman directly referred to as a “disciple” (Acts 9:35-42),<sup>22</sup> Nympha, another leader of a home congregation (Col. 4:15),<sup>23</sup> the evangelists/preachers Evodia and Syntyche,<sup>24</sup> Phoebe, who is described as a deacon, and the apostle Junia.

## Romans 16

In the very last chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul addresses his fellow co-workers, ministers, and leaders. Surprisingly, forty percent (40%) of those mentioned in chapter 16 are women.<sup>25</sup> Included in this list are Phoebe,<sup>26</sup> who is described as a deacon (διάκονον)<sup>27</sup> and

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<sup>18</sup> Other significant figures and narratives include Yeshua’s mother Miriam, her cousin Elizabeth and the birth of John the Immerser, the woman healed with the issue of blood, the healing of Jairus’s daughter, inclusion of Ruth and Rahab in Yeshua’s lineage, the woman with the demon-possessed daughter, the widow at the Temple, among others.

<sup>19</sup> See Matthew 28, Mark 15 and 16, Luke 24, and John 20

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the points immediately below, also note that within Christian tradition, and especially in New Testament apocrypha (see the section further below), Paul is noted as having laid hands on women and anointing them for ministry. See especially tradition about Thecla, a female apostle directly ordained by Paul (logions 40-43).

<sup>21</sup> Acts 16:11-15, 40 and Philippians 4:2

<sup>22</sup> Megan Sauter, “Lydia and Tabitha in the Bible.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, August 9, 2020 and also see Robin Gallaher Branch, “Tabitha in the Bible.” *Biblical Archaeology Review*, April 27, 2016.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2016/06/13/the-new-testament-and-sex-change/?platform=hootsuite>

<sup>24</sup> Philippians 4:2-3

<sup>25</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination.” See footnote on p.78.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 16:1

worthy of any “*help she may require from you (v. 2);*” and Priscilla, a leader along with her husband Aquila.<sup>28</sup> It is noteworthy that Priscilla’s name is usually positioned before her husband’s name in most of the biblical references, a sign of her prominence as a leader. Priscilla and Aquila serves as guides and mentors throughout the early communities, and were spiritual mentors of Apollos (Acts 18:26).

Furthermore, another one of these women, Junia, is traditionally understood as being an apostle (Rom. 16:7). The position of an apostle was one of the highest positions of spiritual authority within the early community of Yeshua followers. According to Roy Blizzard:

Junia ... is a name that is structurally derived from Latin and means “youth.” Most dictionaries and commentaries note that in its form found in Romans 16:7, it could be either masculine or feminine, however, in examining the Scripture, it is probable that Andronicus mentioned with Junia, was actually Junia’s husband and that both were relatives of the Apostle Paul and probably from his home town of Taurusus. This can be concluded from the usage of the Greek word “*suggeneis*,” which is translated into English as “kinsman,” but which principally means “one related by blood.” It is also very probable that they had accepted Jesus as Messiah before Paul had, and might have been instrumental in his own coming to the Lord.<sup>29</sup>

Later translators and commentators had a problem with understanding Junia as a woman. This is evident in the way most of our English translations today render the name into English as the masculine *Junius*, instead of its feminine Greek form, *Junia*. Katherine Smith points out:

The masculine name, Junius, as translated in most bibles, is not found in a single extant manuscript. All contain the feminine name, Junia, which was a common, and well-attested name in the ancient world ... In fact, the Church fathers; through John Chrysostom (4<sup>th</sup> century) all recognized that Junia was a woman. It was not until the fourteenth century, with Aegidius of Rome, that Junia got a sex change.<sup>30</sup>

In commenting on Romans 16:7, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom (347-407) writes:

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<sup>27</sup> There are a number of references to female deacons (deaconesses) in the bible and historical record.

<sup>28</sup> Romans 16:3

<sup>29</sup> Roy B. Blizzard, “The Role of the Woman in the Community of God,” accessed on March 7, 2014, <http://www.biblescholars.org/2013/05/the-role-of-the-woman-in-the-community-of-god.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Silberling, “Position paper regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women,” 6-7.

"To be an apostle is something great! But to be outstanding among the apostles - just think what a wonderful song of praise that is! They were outstanding on the basis of their works and virtuous actions. Indeed, how great the wisdom of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle (*In ep. Ad Romanos* 31.2)."

Chrysostom was not alone in confirming the gender of Junia. Other early Christian commentators include Origen of Alexander (185-253), Jerome (340-419), Hatto of Vercelli (924-961), Theophylact (1050-1108), and Peter Abelar (1079-1142). The gender of Junia and her identification as an apostle was well attested in the early centuries of the Christian Church.

### **The Difficult Passages**

Interestingly, it is also Paul who is often cited as being the most vocal opponent to women in leadership. To support this position, proponents usually highlight two specific passages - 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12. From an initial reading, these two portions do seem to preclude women from spiritual leadership. However, a much closer reading of these texts, their historical and linguistic context, as well as Paul's support and encouragement of women leaders elsewhere in his epistles dispel such claims. Since these two passages are the most often cited in opposition to women in spiritual leadership, to these we will turn our attention.

#### ***1 Corinthians 14:34-35***

*Let your women keep silent in the congregations, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the Torah also says. And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in the congregation (1 Cor. 14:34-35, CJB).*

This passage is hotly debated among scholars for a variety of reasons. Many argue that it was not actually penned by Paul but is a later editorial insertion. According to Charles Lynn

Batten,<sup>31</sup> and supported by many other scholars,<sup>32</sup> this section is sometimes either entirely left out or inserted into inconsistent places in extant manuscripts.<sup>33</sup> The reliability of this passage is even questioned in the footnote in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*.<sup>34</sup> The evidence clearly suggests that this passage was not part of the original letter. However, even if it was originally penned by Paul, it seems to address learners rather than teachers. Therefore, it is not a slam dunk against women serving in spiritual leadership when analyzed further.

The phrase “to speak” in Greek, λαλεῖν (*laleo*), can also mean to “babble or chatter.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, it may be possible that Paul is addressing learners in the congregation rather than a teacher. This understanding would correspond with verse 35, which states “*if they want to learn something, let them ask their husbands at home.*” The possibility that Paul might be addressing learners rather than teachers would also harmonize with passages in Acts and Paul’s letters which seem to support women as leaders and co-workers. For example, if this passage was in fact a statement against women speaking within a congregation, then it would also seem to contradict Paul’s own words in 1 Corinthians 11:5 about women praying and prophesying in the community. According to 11:5, if women were not allowed to pray and prophesy in public, then why would it matter whether their heads were covered or not while doing so?

Forbidding women from speaking entirely would not only contradict Paul himself, but would also contradict evidence of women’s participation in the synagogue,<sup>36</sup> and in their roles as synagogue heads and leaders (αρχισυναγωγος and αρχηγισσα).<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, Josephus records

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Lynn Batten. Class Lecture, “The English Bible as Literature: The Apocrypha (Winter 2006), UCLA, 4 Dec. 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Naomi Koltun-Fromm, “The First Letter of Paul to Timothy,” *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 435, note to vv.11-15.

<sup>33</sup> See the footnote to this passage in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1994), 245.

<sup>34</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1994), 245.

<sup>35</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 78.

<sup>36</sup> Shmuel Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue.” *Jerusalem Perspective*, July-Sept. 1997.

<sup>37</sup> Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*. Brown Judaic Studies 36 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982). Also see Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 69.

that Jewish women spoke publicly both in their capacity as civil leaders and as leaders of synagogues.<sup>38</sup> It would also contradict passages describing Female prophets. Examples include Hannah bat-P’nu’el in Luke 2:36-38 and Acts 21:9 mentions Philip, “one of the seven,” who had four daughters with the gift of prophecy.

### ***1 Timothy 2:11-12***

The second passage often raised in opposition to women in leadership is from Paul’s first letter to his young assistant Timothy:

*Let a woman learn in peace, fully submitted; for I do not permit a woman to teach a man or exercise authority over him; rather, she is to remain at peace* (1 Timothy 2:11-12).

Naomi Koltun-Fromm notes that although this instruction is consistent with Roman moralists (e.g., *Plutarch’s Advice to Bride and Groom* 11.31-33), it is inconsistent with other Pauline passages, particularly those expressed in Romans 16.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, the Greek term used here, *αυθεντείν* (*authenteo*), “to exercise authority” is a *hapax legomenon*, meaning that it is only used this one time in the entire New Covenant.<sup>40</sup> Therefore its precise meaning is slightly ambiguous. The verb may be better understood as “to domineer over” someone.<sup>41</sup> According to Katherine Smith, this “is an extremely negative term for authority, contrasted with the positive term, *εξουσια* (*edzousia*), which is commonly used to refer to proper authority.”<sup>42</sup> This verse seems to not be arguing against a leader who is exercising proper authority, but rather only against domineering or usurping authority. Therefore, like our earlier passage, this verse may not actually forbid women from serving in leadership roles alongside or over men if done so in an appropriate manner. Therefore, it is imperative that

<sup>38</sup> See Josephus, *Ant.* 13.405 and *CIJ* 741. Also see Shira L. Lander, “1 Corinthians,” *The Jewish Annotated New Testament, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 347.

<sup>39</sup> Koltun-Fromm, “The First Letter of Paul to Timothy,” 435.

<sup>40</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 79.

<sup>41</sup> To “domineer”, “have authority over.” BYM Morphology and Barclay-Newman, *Bible Works* (2001).

<sup>42</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 79.

we further weigh these two verses alongside other passages of Paul which present much more positive references to women in spiritual leadership.

### *Colossians 3:18 and Ephesians 5:22*

A note should also be made in reference to verses calling wives to submit to their husbands, as these verses are often used against women in spiritual leadership.<sup>43</sup> However, according to Blizzard:

[T]he Greek word translated into English as “submit or be subject,” is the Greek word “*Hupotasso*,” the definition of which can be found in Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume 8, page 39ff. The verb is not very common ... Kittel states that for a material understanding of the verb in the New Testament, its considerable range of meanings must be noted. In the New Testament the verb does not carry with it the thought of obedience, to obey, or to have to obey, but rather to adapt oneself to another in love. He continues that the New Testament exhortation suggests that the general rule demands readiness to renounce one’s own will for the sake of others, i.e. agape. In exhortation, the middle voice embraces a whole series of meanings from subjection to authority on one side, to considerate submission to others on the other. Its detailed meaning, in any instance, can finally be decided only from the context. I think that it is important to note that the correspondent to *Tasso/Hupotasso* in the Greek is a form of the Hebrew root, “*Kaf, Nun, Ayin*.”

It is important to note that in Hebrew KNA carries with it the meaning of humble. The root can be found on page 488 in Brown Driver Briggs, no. 3665. It is also important to note that in translation the word can have a double meaning, just like in English. A person can be humbled by being conquered or being subdued, but the idea, again, with both the Hebrew *Kanah* and the Greek *Hupotasso* is a voluntary submission or humbling of one’s self by adapting oneself to another in love.<sup>44</sup>

After weighing the evidence, then, it seems clear that women played a pivotal role in the development and growth of the early Yeshua movement and their involvement is demonstrated throughout the canonical New Testament. We have clear evidence that women served in all levels of spiritual leadership. Blizzard also adds, “it is striking that several early Christian women leaders were Jewish; the apostle Junia (Romans 16:7), the teacher and missionary

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<sup>43</sup> Also see Jeffrey L. Seif and Sandra Levitt, *Woman by Divine Design* (Dallas: Zola Levitt Ministries, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Blizzard, “The Role of the Woman in the Community of God,”

Priscilla (Acts 18:2, 18:26; Romans 16:3,4; 1st Corinthians 16, 19; Timothy 4:19; note in Acts 18:26, she teaches in a synagogue context), and possibly the Miriam of Romans 16:6, “who labored much for you.”<sup>45</sup>

### **NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA AND CHRISTIAN TRADITION**

Within the extra-biblical books of the Acts of the Apostles is the book of Thecla, named after its central female figure. Thecla is probably one of the most notable New Testament apocryphal figures aside from the twelve apostles and Paul. Thecla is a legendary woman who became a convert to the “Christian faith” through the work of Paul. According to Bart Ehrman, Thecla “became an enormously important saint and object of devotion, especially for women, down through the Middle Ages.”<sup>46</sup> What separates Thecla from other extra-biblical female figures is that she is not just a heroine of morality and Jewish continuity but is given the full authorization of Paul to fully participate in ministry as an apostle (see especially logions 40-43). In logion 41, Paul gave her the instruction to “*Go and teach the word of God.*” The text concludes with a description of Thecla going out and teaching, and “*enlightening many with the word of God.*” The influence and importance of Thecla on early Christianity cannot be underestimated. As mentioned earlier by Ehrman, veneration of Thecla as a saint continued well into the Middle Ages.

### **WOMEN IN EARLY JUDAISM AS SUPPORTED BY MODERN SCHOLARSHIP**

During the Second Temple period women actively participated within Jewish society, both socially and religiously. Inscriptions discovered in ancient synagogues from the early centuries testify to women serving in various leadership capacities throughout the Jewish world.

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<sup>45</sup> Blizzard, “The Role of the Woman in the Community of God,”

<sup>46</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 113.

These inscriptions include heads of synagogues (αρχισυναγωγος), leaders (αρχηγισσα), and elders (πρεσβυτερα and other parallels).<sup>47</sup> These inscriptions (in feminine conjugations) bear witness to the very public roles of women, thus further proving that women were indeed active members within their spiritual communities.

Women served as leaders of synagogues, participated in ritual services, learned and taught Jewish law, were counted in a *minyan*, and from archaeological evidence, do not seem to have been physically separated from men during prayer. There was active participation in most facets of Jewish ritual life. According to Shmuel Safrai:

In the Second Temple period women were religiously the equals of men: ancient Jewish sources from the land of Israel and from the Diaspora show that women frequented the synagogue and studied in the *beit midrash* (study hall). Women could be members of the quorum of ten needed to say the “Eighteen Benedictions” ... and like men, women were permitted to say “Amen” in response to the priestly blessing.<sup>48</sup>

There is also no apparent archaeological evidence from any of the numerous synagogues that have been excavated that would seem to indicate men and women were required to sit separately. Archaeologist Zeev Weiss, of Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has noted, “By now it is widely accepted among scholars that synagogues from the early centuries of the Common Era did not have a separate women’s section. This might surprise people whose knowledge of Jewish synagogues derives from contemporary Orthodox or pre-Second World War European examples.”<sup>49</sup>

This scholarly assumption is supported by Safrai, who comments, “Rabbinic sources mention various functions for synagogue balconies and upper rooms, but there is never a connection made between these structures and women.”<sup>50</sup> The first reference to a *mechitza* is connected to Abaye (4<sup>th</sup> Cent. CE) in the Babylonian Talmud (*Kiddushin* 81a). However,

<sup>47</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 69.

<sup>48</sup> Shmuel Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue.” *Jerusalem Perspective*, July-Sept. 1997, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Zeev Weiss, “The Sepphoris Synagogue Mosaic.” *Biblical Archaeological Review* (Sept./Oct. 2000), 51.

<sup>50</sup> Safrai, “Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue,” 32.



according many other opinions, this is unrelated to the synagogue.<sup>51</sup> As a result of recent scholarly insight into this subject, any kind of inference of women's inferiority and inability to be a spiritual leader based on supposed separation during prayer is not supported by archaeological or textual evidence.

Such a positive outlook on women is found both within the standard canonical scriptures and extra-biblical writings. Although women's roles became more traditionally subservient to men, with a greater limitation on their ability to fully participate, this was not always the case. There was a time when women were able to participate to a much higher degree within religious life, both in Judaism and in Christianity.

## **OTHER HISTORIC CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Pre-Modern Female Rabbis and Scholars**

There are a handful of female scholars mentioned in the Talmud, the most famous of whom is, of course, Beruriah, the wife of the *Tanna* Rabbi Meir, and considered a respected sage in her own right. Not only is she mentioned in numerous places in the Talmud and rabbinic literature, she is respected for her knowledge on matters of both *halachah* and *aggadah*.

Osnat Barazani, in 17<sup>th</sup> century Kurdistan (modern-day Iraq), served as a *Rosh Yeshiva* and Torah scholar.<sup>52</sup> She was the daughter of a great rabbi, Samuel ben Netanel Ha-Levi Barzani, and received a rare education in Hebrew, Bible, and Jewish texts.<sup>53</sup> Following the death of both her father and her husband, the leadership of the Mosul yeshivah passed on to her without controversy. Although few of her writings have been preserved, she was so revered that she is still remembered as a great rabbi and leader within the Kurdish Jewish community.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Safrai, "Were Women Segregated in the Ancient Synagogue," 29.

<sup>52</sup> <http://www.jofa.org/pdf/Responsa%20on%20Ordination%20of%20Women.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> Sigal Samuel, *Osnat and Her Dove* (Montclair: Levine Querido, 2021), 33.

<sup>54</sup> Samuel, *Osnat and Her Dove*, 33.

## Women Chassidic Rebbes

Throughout the history of the Chassidic movement there have been a number of women praised for their piety, wisdom, leadership and/or scholarship. Furthermore, there are a handful of these women who functioned as, or were in their own right, Chassidic Rebbes. The most well-known example is the *Ludmirer Moid* (the “Maiden of Ludmir”), Chanah Rachel Verbermacher, who lived during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Ukraine (and later settled in Jerusalem).<sup>55</sup> And there are other examples, as well. Ada Rapoport-Albert notes at least eleven additional women “who are said to have commissioned a following in their own right.”<sup>56</sup> Other noteworthy individuals include Eidel (Hodel), the daughter of the Baal Shem Tov; her daughter Feige<sup>57</sup> (who was also the mother of Nachman of Breslov); Rachel, the daughter of Abraham Joshua Heschel of Apt; Chana Chaya, the daughter of Mordecai of Chernobyl; and Eydele of Brody, the daughter of Rabbi Shalom of Belz; among others.<sup>58</sup>

Most of these women who functioned as rebbes, or in specific roles usually reserved for rebbes, were the wives, widows, or daughters of great rebbes. Their *yichus* (family lineage) and otherwise conventional roles as wives and mothers usually allowed for their unusual leadership positions. The primary exception to this is the *Ludmirer Moid*, who was neither married to nor descended from a prestigious rabbinic family.

These women are described as leaders in their own right, regularly receiving *kvitlekh* (slips of paper on inscribed with requests for assistance or blessing), teaching and preaching, performing miracles, and building their own following. They are additionally often described as adopting rigorous standards of personal piety, including practices unusual for

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<sup>55</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden\\_of\\_Ludmir](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maiden_of_Ludmir).

<sup>56</sup> Ada Rapoport-Albert, “On Women in Hasidism” in *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky*, Eds. Rapoport-Albert and S.J. Zipperstein (London: Peter Halban, 1988), 518, n.39.

<sup>57</sup> Who was also the sister of two renowned Hasidic masters—Barukh of Medzhibozh (1757–1810) and Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudlikov (1740–1800?).

<sup>58</sup> For more on this, see my paper “Women Who Functioned as Rebbes.”

women, including wearing *tzitzit* and *tefillin*, *kapote* and *gartl* (belt) during prayer, and in some cases, engaging in learned literary work and producing original Hasidic writings.<sup>59</sup> All of these women were highly respected and sought out for their wisdom and learning.

### **Beginnings of the Modern Debate**

Documented discourse on the possibility of women's ordination began in the mid 1800's. By that time, women were deeply involved in the Jewish community, and their roles expanded as new opportunities arose. Women began serving as leaders of Jewish organizations, serving on synagogue boards, and becoming Jewish educators – teaching cultural and religious topics. The introduction of the Jewish confirmation ceremony to America also helped to involve Jewish women. By 1846, confirmations that included girls were first introduced from Germany to New York City, and soon spread to the rest of the country,<sup>60</sup> thus opening a new door in the world of Jewish observance for female worshipers, and giving them a glimpse of hope for future opportunities.

Rabbinical assemblies, which first appeared in Europe in the 1800's, began discussing issues involving women very early in their histories. At one of the earliest rabbinic conferences, convened in 1837 in Wiesbaden, various committees already began reforming religious instruction being offered to young girls, and began analyzing many of the laws affecting the status of women within Judaism.<sup>61</sup> At a following conference held in Breslau in 1846, Rabbi David Einhorn, one of the more radical Reform rabbis in Germany (and later of America),

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<sup>59</sup> Ada Rapoport-Albert, "Hasidism," *The Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (Jewish Women's Archive), accessed online July 17, 2022 - <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/hasidism#pid-16924>.

<sup>60</sup> Pamela S. Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>61</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 14.

argued in favor of “complete religious equality of the female sex,” and believed that “the halakhic position of women must undergo change.”<sup>62</sup>

In 1889, the journalist and Jewish communal activist Mary M. Cohen, stirred up debate with a short story which appeared on the front page of Philadelphia’s *Jewish Exponent*. Within Cohen’s fictional piece, titled “A Problem for Purim,” she created a female protagonist who dared ask the question “Could not – our *women* – be – ministers?”<sup>63</sup> Through the remainder of the story, Cohen, through her different female characters, set forth in clear forceful rhetoric why women should become rabbis.<sup>64</sup>

Both in Europe and America, women were becoming more involved in professional life – emerging as doctors, lawyers, and successful business entrepreneurs. Within the Jewish community, voices in support of women’s rights continued to echo forth. By the late 1800’s, several women were even admitted to study at Hebrew Union College.<sup>65</sup> Although they were admitted into the rabbinical program, they were denied application for *smicha*. When Henrietta Szold was admitted into the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1903, it was “only after she had assured its administration that she would not use the knowledge thus gained to seek ordination.”<sup>66</sup>

Enough support for these women arose to create a greater push towards women’s ordination. In 1922, the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) passed a resolution declaring that “In keeping with the spirit of our age and the traditions of our conference ...

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<sup>62</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 14.

<sup>63</sup> At the time, the terms “ministers” and “ministry” were used widely in the Jewish community in reference to rabbis and the rabbinate.

<sup>64</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 61.

<sup>66</sup> Anne Lapidus Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women.” *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 93.

women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination.”<sup>67</sup> However, a storm of protests from opponents kept this declaration from becoming a reality. Yet the call for women’s ordination would not go away. Although the ordination of a woman rabbi in America would not come about until 1972 (nearly 50 years later), the reality of a woman rabbi would be much closer than anyone at the time realized.

### **Regina Jonas: Europe’s First Modern Woman Rabbi**

Regina Jonas was devoted to Jewish education. Not content with simply being a teacher, she went on to study at the prestigious *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* (College for the Science of Judaism) in Berlin, under the tutelage of such great Jewish thinkers as Rabbi Dr. Leo Baeck.<sup>68</sup> She devoted her thesis to exploring the Talmudic sources regarding women’s ordination. She was supposed to have been granted *smicha*, with the full support of the majority of her teachers. However, one Talmudic professor who declined to sign her rabbinic diploma kept her from fulfilling her ambition.<sup>69</sup> Finally, at the request of the Union of Liberal Rabbis in Germany, in 1935, Regina Jonas became the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi during a private ordination ceremony conducted by a progressive thinking rabbi.<sup>70</sup> Rabbi Jonas served as a pastor, preacher, and teacher in the Berlin Jewish community. Yet often her role was limited to practicing in homes for the elderly and working with children. She later worked in the Terezin ghetto and perished in Auschwitz in 1944.<sup>71</sup> The memory of Rabbi Regina Jonas quickly faded

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<sup>67</sup> David J. Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction* (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc, 1998), 143.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Sarah, “Rabbi Regina Jonas 1902-1944: Missing Link in a Broken Chain.” *Hear Our Voice*, ed. Sybil Sheridan. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah, “Rabbi Regina Jonas 1902-1944: Missing Link in a Broken Chain,” 3.

<sup>70</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 159.

<sup>71</sup> Sarah, “Rabbi Regina Jonas 1902-1944: Missing Link in a Broken Chain,” 3.

from memory as no one who knew her ever spoke of her, or the fact that she even existed.<sup>72</sup> Yet, she opened the door to future generations of women rabbis.

### Women and Reform Judaism

The Reform Movement created avenues of openness quite early in the area of women's rights. As previously noted, by the mid-1800's issues involving women were already being discussed at rabbinical conferences.<sup>73</sup> The first reforms dealt with the education of young girls and the scrutinization of *halachah* that affected the status of women within Judaism. According to Pamela S. Nadell:

Essentially, discussions of women's status within Judaism revolved around three central issues: ameliorating the position of women within the Jewish laws of marriage and divorce, equalizing their opportunities in Jewish ceremonies, and emancipating them in the synagogue. Initially much concerned the laws of marriage and divorce, many of which, by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, seemed particularly distasteful, if not disgraceful, to modernizing Jews, male and female.<sup>74</sup>

Many of these issues still greatly affect women to this day in more traditional segments of the Jewish world. One of the biggest discussions in *halachic* Judaism concerns the issue of a woman who is an *agunah* (literally "chained" or "anchored").<sup>75</sup> *Agunot* (the pl. of *agunah*) are women who are unable to obtain a Jewish writ of divorce. According to Jewish law, if a man refuses to give his wife a *get*, a *halachic* writ of divorce, then the status of the women remains married. She cannot remarry so long as her husband refuses to give her a *get*.<sup>76</sup> According to strict interpretations of *halachah*, the only way for a woman to gain her freedom from her ex-husband, aside from a *get* would be to legally prove his death.<sup>77</sup> Aside from that, the woman remains in a state of *agunah* (i.e. "chained") to her husband forever. Were she to remarry and have children, it

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<sup>72</sup> Sarah, "Rabbi Regina Jonas 1902-1944: Missing Link in a Broken Chain," 3.

<sup>73</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Blu Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1981), 133.

<sup>76</sup> Greenberg, *On Women and Judaism*, 133 and also see Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 16.

<sup>77</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 15.

would be considered a forbidden union and the children would be considered *mamzerim* (bastards).<sup>78</sup> Horrific stories abound within the Orthodox world concerning *agunot* who remain legally chained to their dead-beat and nowhere-to-be-found husbands. Such situations point to the dire need to critically re-read and re-interpret the Bible and *halachah*.

Other issues concerning women tackled by these early Reform rabbinical assemblies concerned forced Levirate marriage, and *halitzah*, the freeing of a sister-in-law by the brother-in-law of the obligation of Levirate marriage. By 1871, a synod of reform rabbis “agreed that where the secular authorities had declared a missing person dead, the widow could remarry. Furthermore, they adopted, almost unanimously, a resolution dispensing with *halitzah*.<sup>79</sup> The rabbis also set out to create equality for women within the synagogue and quickly included women in all areas of synagogue ritual – including women in a *minyan*, allowing men and women to sit together, calling up women to read from the Torah, and the binding of *mitzvot* upon women in the same way men are bound to the *mitzvot*. In 1845, at a conference of rabbis held in Frankfurt-am-Main, a proposed resolution regarding the status of women was proclaimed:

She has the same obligation as a man to participate from youth up in the instruction in Judaism and in the public services, and that the custom not to include women in the number of individuals necessary for the conducting of a public service is only a custom and has no religious basis.<sup>80</sup>

The roles of women within Reform Judaism continued to be challenged, and more and more the topic of women’s ordination arose. When women were admitted to Hebrew Union College at the turn of the century, and proved their mental competence to be equal to that of men in regard to rabbinical studies, more support continued to arise for women to be ordained. This support finally led to a proposal in 1922, by the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR)

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<sup>78</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 15.

<sup>80</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 17.

to pass a resolution declaring that “In keeping with the spirit of our age and the traditions of our conference...women cannot justly be denied the privilege of ordination.”<sup>81</sup> However, a storm of protests kept this declaration from becoming a reality. It would still take another 50 years of debating the issue before a woman would be ordained within Reform Judaism. Finally in 1972, Rabbi Sally Priesand became the first ordained woman rabbi in America after graduating from Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion.<sup>82</sup> Like Rabbi Regina Jonas before her, she was setting a precedent that could no longer be ignored.

### **Women and Reconstructionist Judaism**

From its inception in 1968, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College immediately began admitting women and training them for the rabbinate.<sup>83</sup> Reconstructionist philosophy, like Reform beliefs, is founded on the basis that men and women have equal rights. In 1974, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso was ordained by the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College as their first female rabbi, and thus became the second woman rabbi in America.<sup>84</sup> In 1977 she was hired by Indianapolis’s Beth El Zadok Synagogue, which was affiliated with both the Reconstructionist and Conservative movements. As such, she also became the first woman rabbi to serve in a Conservative-affiliated congregation.<sup>85</sup>

### **Women and Conservative Judaism**

Stirrings within the Conservative movement regarding a larger ritual role for women began around the turn of the century. In 1903 Henrietta Szold became the first woman to be

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<sup>81</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 143.

<sup>82</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 159.

<sup>83</sup> Nadell, *Women Who Would be Rabbis*, 187-188.

<sup>84</sup> Rebecca Alpert, in her preface to the North American edition of *Hear Our Voice*, ed. Sybil Sheridan. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Avi Hein, “A History of Women’s Ordination as Rabbis.” *Jewish Virtual Library*: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/femalerabbi.html>



admitted into the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS). However, she was accepted “only after she had assured its administration that she would not use the knowledge thus gained to seek ordination.”<sup>86</sup>

Stirrings regarding women’s involvement were happening within the Conservative movement as well, but moved at a much slower pace. Almost fifty years after Henrietta Szold was admitted to JTS, the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly finally published a majority decision in 1955 allowing women to be called up for an *aliyah* to the Torah.<sup>87</sup> Although the 1955 ruling legitimized the practice of calling up women for an *aliyah*, it was not a universal custom in most Conservative congregations. Yet over the next 50 years, the custom of calling up women to the Torah became almost universal in the majority of Conservative congregations.

In 1973 (nearly 18 years after allowing women to be called to the Torah) the Law committee issued another majority responsum which permitted congregations to now count women as a part of the *minyan* for public worship.<sup>88</sup> The 1973 decision was adopted by the United Synagogue (the Movement’s leading body), and a public statement was issued that included the call for the “admission of Women in the Rabbinical School of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.”<sup>89</sup> These decisions too were not immediately accepted by the majority of congregations, but over time the number of supporters continued to grow.

In 1974 the Law Committee issued a *minority* report declaring that women should be permitted to serve as witnesses in *halachic* proceedings, which included signing *ketubot* and *gittin*.<sup>90</sup> Although this was a minority position, because it was signed by at least 6 members of

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<sup>86</sup> Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women,” 93.

<sup>87</sup> Gordon Tucker, “Final Report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis.” *The Ordination of Women as Rabbis*, ed. Simon Greenberg. (New York: JTS Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>88</sup> Tucker, “Final Report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis,” 18.

<sup>89</sup> Tucker, “Final Report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis,” 18.

<sup>90</sup> Tucker, “Final Report of the Commission for the Study of the Ordination of Women as Rabbis,” 18.

the committee rendered it a legitimate option for rabbis and congregations within the Conservative movement.

Finally in 1977 a resolution was proposed to finally convene a committee to discuss the possibility of women being ordained as rabbis.<sup>91</sup> In 1980 the committee reported to the Seminary and then to the Rabbinical Assembly its recommendation to formally accept women into the Rabbinical school of JTS and to ordain competent women as Conservative rabbis.<sup>92</sup> In 1985 (almost 82 years after Henrietta Szold was admitted to JTS) Rabbi Amy Eilberg was ordained by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America as the first female Conservative Rabbi.<sup>93</sup>

### **Women and Orthodox Forms of Judaism**

In the last couple decades women have made tremendous strides within the Orthodox community – both in the United States and Israel. Yet, debates still rage over issues concerning women and women’s ordination. Although the various movements as a whole still do not openly accept the ordination of women as rabbis (and certain segments probably never will), what is not often discussed is that in reality more than at least 100 women have been legitimately ordained as Orthodox rabbis,<sup>94</sup> institutions have been established for the purpose of women’s ordination (including Yeshivat Maraharat, established in 2009, which as of the writing of this paper, has ordained approximately 57 graduates since its inception),<sup>95</sup> and there are co-ed rabbinical programs in Israel.

According to Avi Hein in an article he wrote for the Jewish Virtual Library:

Mimi Feigelson, a student of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach [currently a professor in the rabbinical school at the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem and previously served as

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<sup>91</sup> Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women,” 94.

<sup>92</sup> Lerner, “On the Rabbinic Ordination of Women,” 94.

<sup>93</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 159.

<sup>94</sup> Avi Hein, “A History of Women’s Ordination as Rabbis.” *Jewish Virtual Library*: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/femalerabbi.html>.

<sup>95</sup> [www.yeshivatmaharat.org](http://www.yeshivatmaharat.org).

professor of Rabbinic Studies at the Zielger School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles, received rabbinic ordination in 1994 in Jerusalem] ... Eveline Goodman-Thau was ordained in October 2000 in Jerusalem by Rabbi Jonathan Chipman [a respected rabbi and Torah scholar in Israel]. But the orthodox religious establishment has harshly condemned the actions of these women and others with similar aspirations ... In 1993, Haviva Krasner-Davidson (now Dr. Haviva Ner-David) applied to Yeshiva University's rabbinical school, the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). She never received a response. Instead, it has been reported to her that her application was ridiculed publicly. She is now studying in Israel under Rabbi Dr. Aryeh Strikovsky [and received *smicha* in 2006].<sup>96</sup>

Also in 2006, Dina Najman received private ordination from Rabbi Dr. Daniel Sperber, and became the first woman (in recent history) to be appointed as a congregational leader of an Orthodox congregation that same year. She currently serves as founder and *Marta d'Atra* (spiritual and halakhic leader) of Kehillah of Riverdale, an Orthodox synagogue in the Bronx.<sup>97</sup>

In March of 2009, Sara Hurwitz was ordained with the original title *Mahara''t* (an acronym for *manhiga hilkhaitit rukhanit Toranit*, one who is a teacher of Jewish law and spirituality) by leading Modern Orthodox leader and thinker, Rabbi Avi Weiss. However, the challenge was that there was no precedence for such a title and many people did not understand what it meant. Therefore, in 2010, in another ceremony she received the full title Rabba (a feminine form 'Rabbi'). At the Orthodox Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, Rabba Sara Hurwitz is considered a full member of the rabbinic staff, where she fulfills all functions of a rabbi, including teaching, speaking from the pulpit, officiating at life cycle events, including funerals and weddings, and addresses congregants' halachic questions.<sup>98</sup> Rabba Hurwitz additionally serves as the President and Co-founder of *Yeshivat Maharat*, an Orthodox women's yeshivah that has ordained and placed a number of female clergy within a range of congregations and organizations throughout the Jewish world.

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<sup>96</sup> Hein, "A History of Women's Ordination as Rabbis."

<sup>97</sup> Luo, Michael (21 August 2006). "An Orthodox Jewish Woman, and Soon, a Spiritual Leader". *The New York Times*. Also see her bio on the congregation's website - <https://thekehilah.org/about-us/about-our-marta-datra/>.

<sup>98</sup> <http://yeshivatmaharat.org/saras-story>.

It should be duly noted, however, that women Orthodox rabbis do not function entirely in the same ways as their counterparts within the wider Jewish community. For example, Orthodox interpretation of *halachah* forbids women to make-up a *minyan*, serve on a *beit din*, act as a *posek* (a religious judge), or as a *halachic* witness. Therefore, women rabbis within Orthodoxy would not be able to participate in some of those particular roles. But advocates point out that there is much more to being a rabbi.

Many halachic authorities, both who support and oppose *smikha* for women, acknowledge that many rabbinic roles are not forbidden to women. As such, as Rabba Hurwitz argued in an article in *Moment Magazine*: “I don’t think there’s a 90 percent overlap [between a rabbi’s role and what women can do] ... There is a 100 percent overlap. The rabbi’s job isn’t to make the minyan. It’s to make sure there is a minyan.” She added that women can also serve in roles not open to men, such as accompanying a woman to the mikveh.<sup>99</sup>

Support within Orthodoxy for further ordination of women rabbis continues to grow, and in the last two decades many other women have received Orthodox *smikha* in the United States and Israel. Orthodox Jewish thinker and activist, Blu Greenberg, has noted, “Some highly respected Yeshiva University-ordained modern Orthodox rabbis see no halakhic barriers to women’s ordinations.”<sup>100</sup> This is also true in Israel as the ordination of women becomes more common.

### **Women and Messianic Judaism**

Discussions regarding the ordination of women within the Messianic Jewish community has been stewing for some time. Thirty years ago, in October of 1993, Kay Silberling presented a position paper regarding the ordination of women to the theology committee of the

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<sup>99</sup> <http://www.momentmag.com/moment/issues/2010/12/Feature-Orthodox.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Blu Greenberg, “Is Now the Time for Orthodox Women Rabbis?” *Moment* Dec. 1992: 50-53, 74.

International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS).<sup>101</sup> However, her proposal at the time did little to change any minds. In 2001, Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer wrote an article in support of women rabbis which appeared in *Voices of Messianic Judaism*, edited by Reform rabbi Dr. Dan Cohn-Sherbok.<sup>102</sup> Also in 2001, Kay Silberling published an article in support of women's ordination that appeared in *Kesher*, a Messianic Jewish scholarly journal.<sup>103</sup>

Both the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations (UMJC) and the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues (IAMCS), which together represent the majority of Messianic congregations around the world, currently do not ordain women as rabbis (although both organizations offer licensing options for women).<sup>104</sup>

In May of 2011, the Messianic Jewish Rabbinical Council (MJRC) passed historic resolutions recognizing the ability of women to serve as rabbis and that it would welcome them as full members.<sup>105</sup> On June 3, 2018, Rabbi Dr. Vered Hillel was ordained by the MJRC, becoming the first woman to receive ordination from a leading international Messianic Jewish organization.

Other notable female Messianic rabbis include Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer in London, who was ordained in 1997 in a private ceremony, Rabbanit Shirel Dean<sup>106</sup> in Portland, Oregon, who also received *smikha* through a private ordination ceremony, and Rabbi Lynn Fineberg, who was

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<sup>101</sup> Kay Silberling, "Position Paper Regarding Leadership/Ordination of Women." Presented to the International Alliance of Messianic Congregations and Synagogues, October 15, 1993.

<sup>102</sup> Ruth Fleischer, "Women can be in Leadership." *Voices of Messianic Judaism*. Ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok. (Baltimore: Lederer, 2001), 151-157.

<sup>103</sup> Kathryn J. Silberling, "Gender and Ordination," *Kesher*, (Albuquerque: A UMJC Publication, Summer 2001), 68-81.

<sup>104</sup> A note should be made that while the Union of British Messianic Jewish Congregations (UBMJC) existed, they ordained women in all areas of leadership within their congregations. They were probably the only Messianic congregational organization to do so (personal email correspondence with Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer, May 2007).

<sup>105</sup> See the definition of a "Messianic Jewish Rabbi" and the FAQs section at [www.ourrabbis.org](http://www.ourrabbis.org).

<sup>106</sup> Shirel Dean chose the Hebrew term "rabbanit" instead of using "rabbi" also due in part to the current social structure within Messianic Judaism. The term can be taken in a couple of ways...one as simply a rabbi's wife, in which there would be no offense. The other is as a woman Rabbi or other more authoritative teacher.

also ordained in a private ceremony which included Rabbi Dr. Ruth Fleischer.<sup>107</sup> A handful of women have also received UMJC credentials as Madrikhot, including Shulamit Goldin. These women are definitely pioneers in a movement that is often not quite ready for them. Although they do not always receive the credit and respect they deserve, hopefully their service will open the doors for other women within Messianic Judaism in the future.

### CONTRIBUTIONS AND INNOVATIONS OF WOMEN RABBIS

Rabbi David J. Zucker rightly notes that “Women rabbis have changed the face of Judaism.”<sup>108</sup> With the introduction of women to the rabbinate, they have brought with them unique approaches and insights. The change toward smaller and MORE intimate congregations, as well as *havurah* groups, women’s *Rosh Chodesh* study groups, and social justice committees have all been introduced, or heavily influenced, by women rabbis.<sup>109</sup> In addition, women rabbis have introduced greater participation, intimacy, and empowerment.<sup>110</sup>

Anyone familiar with ministry (which includes the rabbinate) is well-aware that it can be an all-consuming life. The demands on one’s time and family are tremendous, and often it is the families of rabbis who receive the losing end of the deal. As a result, there is a dire need to create a balance between one’s role as a rabbi and one’s family life. With the influence of women rabbis, Rabbi Zucker notes:

The need for balance is not in itself an inherently “gender-related” issue, and it has much wider implications and applications than merely the rabbinate. That some male rabbis are also seeking “balance” between their professional and personal lives is not in dispute. In terms of the rabbinate, however, it was women rabbis who raised the issue first and this is part of their enduring legacy to the profession.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Personal telephone conversation with Lynn Fineberg, May 10, 2007.

<sup>108</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 146.

<sup>109</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 146-147.

<sup>110</sup> Janet Marder, “How Women are Changing the Rabbinate.” *Reform Judaism* (Summer, 1991), 5.

<sup>111</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 149.

With a greater focus on intimacy, women rabbis have often chosen smaller pulpits where they can form a much closer relationship with their congregants, and where it is much easier to establish a greater sense of community.<sup>112</sup> Yet, there are also other factors that come into play in such decisions. Often, smaller positions allow for a greater balance in their personal and professional lives. Additionally, it is not always by choice. Often, many of the larger congregations are not always open to female rabbis (although this too is rapidly changing, with women now at the helm of some of the largest congregations). Although women are commonly associate rabbis at the largest synagogues, most still prefer for the senior leader to be male.

Finally, women rabbis are also attributed with introducing a greater sense of empowerment. Zucker again notes that “empowerment is defined by most women rabbis as a conscious desire to replace the more traditional hierarchal structures with a much greater emphasis on ‘shared responsibilities, privileges and power.’”<sup>113</sup> Julie Goss adds, “Women rabbis are consciously reinterpreting the relationship between rabbi and congregant. No longer is it ‘omnipotent patriarchal leader and humble follower,’ for the rabbi’s role is being redefined.”<sup>114</sup> Both Goss and Zucker quote Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin in stating that, “It’s no longer the distant holy man, but rather the hand holder, and educator to inspire and teach ... The idea is to empower the congregant to be a more active member of the Jewish community.”<sup>115</sup>

Women rabbis are often working toward a model of “creative partnership,” and their influence is impacting their male counterparts as well. The influence of female rabbis is causing male rabbis to refocus their attention on intimacy, empowerment, and personal and family balance. Women rabbis have proved that they can serve the Jewish community in an effective

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<sup>112</sup> Marder and Zucker, *op. cit.*, 150.

<sup>113</sup> Zucker, *American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction*, 151.

<sup>114</sup> Julie Goss, “Women in the Pulpit: Reworking the Rabbi’s Role.” *Lilith* 15:4 (Fall), 85.

<sup>115</sup> Goss, “Women in the Pulpit: Reworking the Rabbi’s Role,” 16-17.

manner, and having both male and female rabbis will bring a more well-rounded and balanced leadership model to the Jewish community.

### **WOMEN AND THE CHURCH**

This paper, drawing upon the strengths of its author, focused primarily on the question of women as spiritual leaders from a primarily Jewish and biblical perspective. However, an entire paper could be presented on a similar history of women within Christianity (but that is outside of my expertise). One example is Aimee Semple McPherson, who founded the Foursquare movement, which included women in all levels of ministry from its inception in 1923. Other notable examples of female leaders could include Beth Moore, Kathryn Kuhlman, and popular bible-teachers like Marilyn Hickey and Joyce Meyer.

Foursquare was not unique in including women in all areas of ministry. The Assemblies of God is another denomination that ordained women from its inception in 1914, and according to a recent report, 27.6% of its ministers are women.<sup>116</sup> The Congregational Church ordained its first female pastor in 1825, and the Methodist Church began ordaining women in the 1950's. Quakers, from their beginning, have allowed women and men equal ability to speak in worship meetings. And many other movements and denominations also support women in various spiritual leadership roles, including Episcopal and Anglican, Vineyard, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and many others. A few of these have even done so for generations. The only major denominations who do not ordain women include the Southern Baptist Convention,<sup>117</sup> the Roman Catholic Church, and a few others. It should be noted, those remaining holdouts are also

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<sup>116</sup> <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2022/august/assemblies-god-ordain-women-record.html>

<sup>117</sup> Some significant Southern Baptist churches were recently expelled for ordaining women, including Rick Warren's Saddleback Church in California, now co-pastored by a woman (Pastor Stacie Wood).



the same ones at the center of recent sexual abuse scandals which could likely have been better mitigated or addressed had there been women in present in leadership.<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Anne Lapidus Lerner once put forward the question, “If, as has been argued, there is no halakhic barrier, on what grounds can we exclude capable, committed women from the rabbinate?” That is my question as well. If we have examples and evidence of women serving as leaders in the Tanakh, serving in all levels of spiritual leadership in the New Testament, and as significant leaders throughout history, then what is holding us back? Yeshua had female disciples. Paul ordained and supported women in all levels of ministry. Textual evidence and historic inscriptions include references to women as heads of synagogues (αρχισυναγωγος), leaders (αρχηγισσα), and elders (πρεσβυτερα and other parallels).<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, these references (often in feminine conjugations) prove that women were active members and leaders within their spiritual communities. Josephus describes women as also engaged in civic society.

Gender norms have continuously evolved and regressed throughout history, and much of our modern discussion was shaped not during the biblical eras, but during the Middle Ages and early modern periods, when many of the most famous theologians and biblical commentators lived, and when the roles of women were much more restricted and less nuanced than at other times throughout history. There are those who might argue, for example, that the discussion of women in spiritual leadership is a result of the “women’s liberation” movement, or the product of more recent social agendas. But this discussion is neither a new phenomenon nor a unique

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<sup>118</sup> There are recent instances within the Messianic Jewish community where women in leadership roles have influenced male colleagues to act on abuse or sexual impropriety.

<sup>119</sup> Silberling, “Gender and Ordination,” 69.

product of the modern world, as many ancient sources also wrestle with similar questions concerning the roles of women. The question is as old as the biblical sources themselves.

Therefore, if there is no valid social, biblical, or historic reason to continue refusing Messianic Jewish ordination to qualified women, then it is time to revise our current position. Throughout history women have served as deacons, elders, evangelists, congregational leaders, apostles, and even clergy. Given the strong support for women in various spiritual leadership roles in Scripture and throughout history; and since it seems the only remaining barriers are social assumptions and biases without clear biblical or historic justification, then it is time for Messianic Judaism to formally welcome women into more active leadership roles, including openly ordaining them as rabbis.

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